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Fighting in Lebanon: A Reappraisal of Damascus

U.S. Analysts Upgrade Opinion of Syrian Units

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One lesson drawn from yesterday's American air attacks in Lebanon, United States and North Atlantic alliance intelligence specialists say, is that Syrian air defenses in Lebanon are far stronger and, significantly, more mobile than anticipated.

Analysts said the air defenses that engaged the Navy bombers were probably manned by Syrians exclusively. They did not reject the possibility that Soviet technicians could have been visiting the sites during the attack. But they pointed out that yesterday's brief Soviet press report on the raid made no mention of the presence of Russians in the battle area.

7,000 Soviet Personnel

But they said the scale of Soviet involvement in any future actions presented a problem for American planners and for other commanders of the international ground, air and land forces in and off Beirut. About 7,000 Soviet technicians and infantrymen serve in Syria, and attacks into Syria by Western aircraft could put these forces at risk and, possibly, provoke Soviet reaction.

The Syrian defensive response to the raid by 28 American jet bombers, escorted by F-14 fighters, was heavy. According to a Pentagon source the Syrians fired about 40 SA-7 and SA-9 missiles at the American aircraft plus a barrage of antiaircraft fire from ZSU-23 and ZSU-57 self-propelled, radar-guided guns.

United States sources said they did not know what weapons knocked down two Navy planes, one an A-6E and the other an A-7E. One Lebanese source said both aircraft were shot down by SA-7 missiles. This is a heat-seeking infantry missile that can be fired by one man with a launcher aimed from the shoulder.

Pentagon sources reported that a third American aircraft was hit in its exhaust pipe, possibly by a surface-to-air missile. But it managed to return to the carrier.

The SA-9, which is radar guided, is

fired from scout cars or light armored vehicles.

Use of 'Smart Bombs'

The Navy's A-6E is a more advanced version of the A-6's first deployed in 1963; the A-7E is a descendant of the A-7's first deployed in 1966. The former is powered by two turbojet engines and carries a pilot and a navigator-bombardier. The A-7E is a single-seat bomber powered by one turbofan engine.

Intelligence sources said they believed "smart bombs" were used against the Syrian targets. Such bombs are guided by television or radar.

North Atlantic alliance and Israeli military sources noted that there were no American reports that electronic or other countermeasures had been used to divert Syrian missiles.

Analysts said the Syrians had apparently learned from last year's defeat by the Israelis not to turn on their radars, which attacking planes can use to home in on antiaircraft emplacements, until they are under attack.

About 300 Syrian MIG's

A second lesson, these sources said, is that the Syrians are not prepared to risk aerial combat with American F-14's or with any of the modern aircraft stationed on the American and French carriers lying off Beirut.

Syria has just under 300 Soviet-made MIG's of various vintages in its interceptor force, but most of these, intelligence analysts said, are deployed around Damascus to defend the capital.

Soviet SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles recently deployed in Syria present the greatest danger to the American fleet, North Atlantic Treaty Organization sources said. These missiles, which some analysts say have a range of 120 miles, are more accurate and have a longer range than Syria's Scud missiles, also provided by the Soviet Union.

Naval sources said the SS-21, "unless the shot was extraordinarily lucky," could not sink an American carrier or major surface ship. But it could, they said, put the vessel out of action for some days.

Weighing the Syrian potential against American and other Western forces in the region, American and allied intelligence sources judged the Western situation as favorable. They believe that yesterday's raid showed the Syrians that the United States had the power to punish Syrian attacks on its planes or, indeed, any renewed attacks on the United States marines.

Health of Syrian President

But they argued that the American foray also underlined that the only effective weapon against the Syrians or other enemies of the Government of Amin Gemayel in Beirut is air power.

The marines, a spokesman said, retired into their bunkers as soon as the raid began. Patrols by the marines and the French, British and Italian units in the multinational force are at a minimum and, in consequence, their military impact on the Lebanese is now marginal.

Intelligence analysts in Washington saw the shelling of the United States Marine position late yesterday as a partial retaliation for the Navy bombing. They said they were concerned that the Druse and Moslem militiamen, spurred by the Syrians, would continue such attacks despite shelling from the United States naval squadron.

Intelligence officers at NATO said one unknown factor in the situation was the condition of Syria President's, Hafez al-Assad. Their view was that the Syrian Government would not be in a position to react instantly and effectively against future American strikes if the President is seriously ill, as persistent rumors assert.

These sources added that the West might find it fortunate that both Mr. Assad and Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader, were incapacitated to some degree at a critical moment for the fortunes of their two countries in the Middle East.